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THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 70

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The Idea of an English Association

By

SIR HENRY NEWBOLT, C.H., D.LITT.
President, 1928

July, 1928



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THE IDEA OF AN ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

A PRELUDE

IT is told of Admiral Collingwood that, when he was at home on leave in 1802, he used to walk about his Northumbrian estate with a bag of acorns, planting one in every suitable spot, in order that the England of a hundred years later might not lack timber for building men-of-war. When the next great war came upon us in 1914 the oak was no longer the material of battleships; but it had a new and hardly less important use, for there was a stage in the naval campaign when the necessary supply of pitprops for our mines could no longer be imported from Norway.

This is no singular story—it has many parallels. We say commonly of a successful enterprise that its founders builded better than they knew; and in so saying we do not merely record their good luck, we offer a tribute of praise and admiration, and the tribute is deserved. There is always a veil over the future—no one can foresee what fate is in store for his foundation. But he may well be satisfied, and we may well praise him, if we live long enough to be sure that what he has created is a living thing rather than any kind of building; since it is generally to living things rather than to buildings that new possibilities present themselves.

You will guess of what enterprise, of what foundation I am thinking. It is twenty-one years ago since I was invited to join with a few others—of whom I think Lord Ernle, his brother Sir George Prothero, and Professor Andrew Bradley were the leaders—in the setting on foot of a new society, to be called The English Association. The original suggestion, as I understood, had come from several members of the teaching profession who desired to establish some kind of fellowship among themselves and at the same time to get into touch with the world of English letters. I do not remember that in the preliminary discussions any very definite Articles of Association were proposed or adopted: the movement was a true movement—that is to say, it made no attempt to assume the form of an Institution, but was content to start from an instinctive common feeling and to march in the direction of the horizon. Looking back we can now see that we had certain points in view: to promote English scholarship, to raise the standard of education and especially of self-education, to increase our membership to the utmost, and to recruit it from the whole

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British Commonwealth. Of the rapid advance of the Association towards these three objectives there is no need for me to say anything; but there remains a fourth aim, that desire for fellowship and for a wider and more immediate touch with contemporary English writers and critics, which was perhaps the very central germ of our acorn of twenty-one years ago.

It has not in these years been forgotten or unproductive—in many centres all over the country, in the Dominions, and especially in our annual general meetings in London, we have spent many happy and profitable hours. Nothing here has been wasted, nothing lost, but the very success of our Association has suggested to me a question, a doubt whether we have yet realized our advance and its meaning, whether we have not perhaps accepted the social side of our activities as a mere matter of procedure. I have to-day the opportunity of putting this question to you: I have been asking myself, and I now ask you, whether the true idea of an English Association, that which it was to be, has not been waiting to reveal itself at the fateful moment, the moment of a great national need, which no other agency is at the present time capable of satisfying, because no other has the same wide acceptability or the same unexhausted impetus.

No one will deny that there is this national need: we are all too frequently reminded that we have suffered a change, we have lost our old world and have not yet made a tolerable new one. There may be some among us who hope for a restoration, a rebuilding, as it were, after a bombardment. If such a restoration were possible, in the nature of things, which I feel sure it is not, the first question we should have to ask ourselves would be whether there has been in our recent social history any age so golden that we should be doing well in returning to it. The causes of our present discontent lie farther back than we generally suppose: the gulf between the old England and the new was not cleft by the war of 1914 to 1918, but by the French Revolution and the war of 1793 to 1815. I believe that we shall not be far wrong if we attribute the chaotic social conditions of to-day to a wrong turn taken in the early years of the nineteenth century. Among the ruling class at that time the knowledge of the Classics, the interest in English poetry, the command of a fine English prose, were common enough to be hardly noted as graces, and when Wordsworth complained that the education of his day was a tissue of mere ‘formalities’, in strong contrast with ‘the passions of mankind . . . the depth of human souls . . . real feeling and just sense’ he was thinking of the growing poverty of the Grammar-school

education, and forgetting the high standard attained by the one class which could be said to have received any real education at all. We have interesting glimpses of the truth in the too-small volume of *Recollections* by Samuel Rogers, in which the poet or banker, as you please to classify him, records in brief notes his conversations with men more highly placed and infinitely more distinguished than himself. The talk turned two or three times on Homer, and the opinion of Charles James Fox is thus reported: 'Homer—the interview between Priam and Achilles his finest passage. . . . None more mistaken than those who think Homer has no delicacy—he is full of it. Did Penelope *never* name Troy? He had remarked that delicacy, and also her not mentioning Ulysses by name.' Again, 'Homer almost always speaks well of women'; and again, 'Nausicaa exquisite: better than anything'. Farther on we find Henry Grattan remarking on another occasion, 'Priam very well bred—especially towards Helen'.

These opinions, with the passages which justify them, would furnish material for an essay much longer than this, and directed to a different point. My argument to-day is concerned not with Homer but with his readers. Let me remind you for a moment of Fox's preference—the scene between Priam and Achilles, the scene in which the aged Trojan king goes, without escort or truce, to the camp of that enemy who has slain his most loved son. He goes to beg humbly that he may ransom the dead body and give it burial. He clasps the knees of Achilles in accordance with the ritual for suppliants, and entreats him in these words: 'O godlike Achilles, remember thy father that is of like years with me on the grievous pathway of old age. Him it may be the dwellers round about are entreating evilly, nor is there any to ward off ruin and destruction from him. Nevertheless while he heareth of thee as yet alive he rejoiceth in his heart and hopeth day after day that he shall see his dear son returning from Troyland. But I, I am utterly unblest, since of all my sons him who was yet left and guarded city and men, him, even Hector, thou slewest but now, as he was fighting for his country. For his sake I come unto the ships of the Achaians that I may win him back from thee, and I bring with me untold ransom. Fear thou the gods, Achilles, and have compassion on me, even me, bethinking thee of thy father. See, I am more piteous than he is, and I have braved what no other man on earth hath braved before, to stretch forth my hand toward the face of the slayer of my sons.'

'Thus spake he, and stirred within Achilles desire to make lament for his own father. And he touched the old man's hand and gently

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moved him back.' Then we are told how they both bethought them of their dead, and how Priam wept for his son and Achilles for his father. Then the great captain gathers himself up and speaks of the sadness of life, and he tells the old man to keep courage and lament not unabatingly in his heart, bidding him to a seat. Priam is still not sure whether his petition is accepted: nothing has yet been said of giving back the dead: he must be braver yet. 'Bid me not to a seat', he says, 'so long as Hector lieth uncared for, but straightway give him back that I may behold him with mine eyes. . . .' Then fleet-footed Achilles looked sternly upon him and said, 'Chafe me no longer, old sire: of myself am I minded to give Hector back to thee. . . . Therefore now stir my heart no more amid my troubles, lest I leave not even thee in peace . . . although thou art my suppliant, and lest I transgress the commandment of Zeus.'

After this outburst—a strangely natural touch it seems even to-day, after three thousand years—Achilles returns to his courtesy and generosity. But though the old man sups with his terrible host, he escapes before daybreak with that which he came to ransom.

You will agree, I think, that such a piece of work, the work of such a poet as this, could not possibly have been included among 'those formalities' of which Wordsworth spoke so contemptuously: nothing could bear more directly upon the passions of mankind and the depth of human souls. It was not, then, the Classics as known to men like Fox and Grattan that Wordsworth proposed to strike out from his scheme of education: what he banned was the weary work among the 'grammatical flats and shallows' by which alone the freedom of the Classic lands could be attained. No mind can be ennobled by the rudiments of Latin and Greek: yet to get beyond these is impossible for the multitude; therefore, in the common view of that time, *they* must remain without education of the only kind which is desirable for its own sake—that which gives high ideals, personal and political, a quick sense of justice, of sympathy, and of pity, a habit of generous admiration, a perpetual remembrance of the respect due to others as well as to oneself, and consequently, as we have seen, a keen normal perception of the delicacy with which these habits and traits are exhibited in great literature. Wordsworth thought that the humanities—the studies which give experience of human life, delicacy of feeling, and habitual courtesy of speech—could be achieved by sympathetic intercourse with every passer-by on the highway, and by acquaintance with the Great Nature exhibited

in the works of mighty poets. In this I believe he came nearer to the truth than any Englishman of his time—nearer to the right turn when every one of his contemporaries was taking the wrong one. What a pleasure it would be to put the clock back, to meet Fox as Rogers met him, and to question him with the full certainty of a frank and genial answer! ‘Are you, Sir, of the opinion of the people whom Mr. Locke quotes, that “these are the learned languages, fit only for learned men to meddle with and teach?”—that English is the language of the illiterate vulgar?’

‘Why no,’ Fox would reply, ‘that is stark nonsense, for English was used by Milton in his *Paradise Lost*, where Satan is very well bred: and so in general is Milton himself, excepting it may be a passage in Samson, and another on the *Paradise of Fools*.’

Here is our opportunity for a crucial question. ‘Then, Sir, if Milton has the same qualities as Homer, might we not do well to use him and others like him in place of an author so fenced off from us by years of Greek syntax and irregular verbs?’

To this an answer comes in a less audible voice, which may or may not be that of Fox. ‘You were speaking of the learned and of what is well bred in notable authors. I do not know that learning and good breeding need be any concern of those who work with their hands—give them freedom and a good wage, they have all the breeding, I believe, that can be to their advantage.’

‘To their advantage, no, no, Sir, nor to ours, do you think?’

But the conversation is over: the clock has been put on again. We are left to muse on the disconcerting fact that men of the age which Fox adorned came so near to the right road, and yet went aside from it, leading astray four generations of Englishmen and wasting more than a century of effort. They recognized what was a fine means of education; but they believed it to be a useless luxury for all but rich men of a restricted class, because they took education to have a different meaning for different classes, and the class divisions of their day they thought to be natural and perpetual. Conditions of life, and political rights, might be and must be altered for the better, but no one had yet conceived the idea of a socially undivided nation.

Now I am not suggesting that in 1805 any one could have been expected to propose a liberal education for the whole people, based on the masterpieces of English literature. That would have needed some general interest in education, leading to some action by the legislature. But ministers were at that time in the long-drawn agony of a world war and hard put to it to find the means of carrying it on. It was not until 1833 that the House of Commons

voted for the first time a small grant for education. What I am regretting is that neither the course nor the consequences of nineteenth-century politics were clearly foreseen or provided for. The period was in many ways an admirable one, and did not merit the lofty contempt with which some of the Epigoni now look down upon it. It is enough to remember that it brought forth giants and carried on great traditions, both in the arts and sciences. But in politics it was an improvised and ill-organized experiment: it progressed with alternate rashness and restraint on generally liberalizing principles, now and again enlarging the franchise in the hope, sometimes faint, sometimes fanatical, that education would advance more rapidly than the birth-rate. Education did advance, but it advanced by the wrong road and carried with it not unity but a growing danger of disunion, till at last peace was only possible at all so long as the national prosperity kept pace with the national appetite. For this kind of progress the natural end was waiting: the manual workers grew in voting power, their interests began to take the first place, their burden of taxation was lightened at the expense of the rich. The change was well borne at first, for opinion admitted the justice of the new arrangements. But after a time some began to doubt whether the main object of this vicarious generosity was not the political support of the all-powerful majority, rather than the welfare of the community considered as a whole. A new bitterness was imported into party struggles when it first became plausible to attribute success at the polls to the efficacy of what was openly called national bribery. Even this was in time forgotten, and in the great war heavy sacrifices were endured without a murmur by men who had never before been considered rich enough to be worth plucking. Then came the propaganda of the new Russian political system, under the influence of which there was to be heard up and down the country so much talk of confiscation and the class war that it was thought by some worth while to try the experiment in earnest. Even that, even the memory of our nine days' Civil War is rapidly fading into the twilight of history; but it remains true for the present that we are no longer in any sense a nation at peace within itself.

I beg you to mark that in this brief retrospect I am reviewing from no partisan standpoint the developments I have mentioned. They were as much the effects of their causes as other events in our history, and have so far no appearance of being fatal. What I do regret and desire to remedy is the social disunion which threatens us. For a long time past and—up to a certain time—in

a growing degree, we who live in England have been able to count on the general temper and habit of mind of the whole people, as expressed in our social life. We have had a common culture, rudimentary but really national. A distinguished German politician, writing soon after the war and therefore not likely to be prejudiced in our favour, in reviewing the nations gave this account of our distinctive character: ‘The final judgement of the British in the affairs of life is “this is English”, “that is not English”. Foreign lands are a subject of geographical and ethnological study. The whole mighty will of a nation is here concentrated in the form of civilizing political energy. Every private inclination is a fad, and even fads have their fixed forms. An offence against table manners is banned like an attack on the Church. Nature is mastered with consideration and intelligence, whether the problem is the breeding of sheep or the ruling of India.’ And in another passage he speaks of the influence of the English on culture as having been surpassed by none.

It is a flattering account, but its meaning is perhaps less favourable than it seems on a first reading. Seven years ago I accepted it with pleasure, but I have since had time and good cause to reconsider it. Who are the English of whom Walther Rathenau is speaking, and upon whose culture has their great influence been concentrated? It is true that the social forms and the political ideas of other nations have been influenced by ours, as ours in past centuries have been influenced by those of France, Italy, or Spain. We may be glad to hear this acknowledged, but we would rather have been shown by a credible witness that we had concentrated our national will on civilizing political energy at home, in our own islands.

Are we doing so now? Are we still in a position to make the attempt? Let us remember to begin with that our concentration can be at best only a partial one: there are now intellectual forces at work in the country which aim at superseding our present national culture, and not at preserving or civilizing it. I might come to agree with them if I believed that our native culture must always remain in great part the possession and influence of a single class or a small minority. But to-day I speak in the faith that this is not so: in the faith that the national culture should be, and in good time may be, the tradition and inheritance of all British men and women who care to receive it. I put before you no hope of securing a general equality in wealth or health, in intellect or physique or in any other of the circumstances of a varying world; but I ask you to hope with me for a national fellowship in which

it shall be possible for every one to forget the existence of classes and to find a personal interest in each other's circumstances and events.

You will expect me, after speaking of hopes and faith, to say something more practical before I conclude. First, then, I would remind you that though we are not as well off or as far advanced as we might have been if the men of 1805 had had a different conception of the meaning and possibilities of education, still we have this advantage, that we have had our eyes opened and know what it is that we need and where it is to be obtained. We are no longer under the belief that education is an entirely different thing for men who live in different circumstances; because we have realized that education is not merely a preparation for individual life, but a training for social life, life in a nation, where the great main interests of all are the same. I say confidently that we have realized this, because your Association had a preponderant share in bringing about a record and a report of this realization some seven years ago. The report declared the necessity of what must be, in however elementary a form, a liberal education for all English children, whatever their position or occupation in life: that on all the evidence available an education of this kind is the greatest benefit which could be conferred on any citizen of a great state, and that the common right to it, the common discipline and enjoyment of it, the common tastes and associations connected with it, would form a new element of national unity, linking together the mental life of all classes by experiences which have hitherto been the privilege of a limited section.

Further, the report anticipated that if we use English literature as a means of contact with great minds, as a channel by which to draw upon their experience with profit and delight, and as a bond of sympathy between the members of a human society, we shall succeed, as the best teachers of the Classics have often succeeded, in their more limited field.

Since the words which I have just quoted were written, only seven years have passed, and the time therefore for decisive results has not yet come. The signs so far are favourable, but in these seven years there have also been signs of unfavourable influences. These, however, are, in one way or another, connected with politics, and though the whole subject now engaging us is in the true sense of the word political, as concerned with the life of the State, our first care, the care of every good citizen, must be to keep education safe from *party* politics, which would be likely to bring it death rather than life. We have only to remember that

in vital matters it is the welfare of all that we are aiming at, and the fellowship of all, whether they agree with us or disagree in the political field.

But again we must remember that even if all goes as well as we can hope, it will be long before that which the children are now receiving at school will seriously affect the social life of the nation. The really practical question for us is, what can we do immediately? This is a doubly important matter, for the more quickly we can get forward with the creation of a new adult society, the better will be the effect on the children of the new education when their time comes to join it.

At this point I think we may usefully warn each other—though there can be few of us ignorant of the fact—that the young generations now and hereafter leaving school will not come to us asking or even tolerating advice or guidance. The new society will not be formed on a paternal, a charitable, or even a philanthropic basis. It must be a community first desired and afterwards valued, for its own sake, for the pleasures it offers and the self-development and self-confidence which it confers. Whatever the young may think, no man can stand alone in the world: the more friends he has the stronger he will feel, and the more of them he understands the more he will discover about himself. As to the pleasures I feel my hopes firmly based; for holding audiences of almost every kind I have had reason to note that ‘the passions of mankind, real feeling and just sense’, have not yet lost their power. Even ‘the pictures’ do not please without some touches of reality, some stirring of that which is not mere sensation. The Englishman is a great moralizer, and a great man of feeling. I should expect the scene between Priam and Achilles, well read and with a slight introduction, to be perfectly to the taste of any audience in town or country who had no reason to suspect that they were being given something for their good.

About the form and name of the new society—if it is to have either form or name—I have thought a good deal during the last five years. Sometimes I have wondered whether we might be infringing the patent of the Freemasons, and I remember once waking from a nightmare dream that I had been convicted of conspiring to found a new kind of University. That dream was not due, I believe, to a complex of any kind, but to my having chanced upon some verses by the poet Gower—they were written in fourteenth-century French and they begin with the suggestive line ‘A l’université de tout le monde’, which I take to be the equivalent of ‘To the Everyman University’. Such a name does

indeed combine well with the secret method of one of our own universities, as revealed to us by Stephen Leacock in his *Discovery of England*. He says that the key to the mystery of an Oxford education is to be found in the operations of the person called the tutor, but that it is in fact a communal process. 'It is from him (the tutor), or rather with him, that the students learn all that they know. . . . What an Oxford tutor does is to get a little group of students together and smoke at them. Men who have been smoked at for four years turn into ripe scholars.' This is a true picture, and nothing could be more apt for an illustration of our idea—the idea of a ripeness brought about by constant friendly leisurely intercourse: exactly the ripeness which we so admire in the age of Fox and Pitt, and so grievously miss in this age of perpetual motion. But the typical modern university is not wholly described in Leacock's brilliant discovery: it is always an Institution, and one whose ripening process is limited to four years at most. Even the name has lost its truth in the course of centuries: it may once have promised some kind of universality, but it now connotes specialism, competitive examinations, and the inability to take in all who wish to enter.

The result is that I think we must add neither a new name nor a new institution to those already existing: the new society must come about by the extension of one which is already in existence and in whose original idea this particular extension was always implicit. The English Association was not designed to be a teaching corporation, an examination board, or a set of hostels for students taking a four-year course. If it is less than a university in these and other respects, it yet attempts as seriously to promote humane studies, and it has two great additional advantages—it offers its members a lifelong course and unlimited freedom of entrance. Finally, and this is the vital point, it is in no way limited by class associations. It is only natural that the ripening process, the humane education sought by Wordsworth, should advance more rapidly when there is no cloud of formality over the everyday sun, not even the chill early mist of first acquaintance. To visit a branch of the Association in a distant town has often reminded a visitor of the sociability of one of the Dominions, where hospitality is unshackled by caution or self-consciousness. And if thanks have been offered to such a visitor, how often it has happened that he has felt himself to be the debtor rather than the creditor in the experience!

These are real pleasures and real profits of which I have been speaking—they are a kind of trade in which both sides are left

with a balance of advantage. How this trade can best be fostered within its own frontiers the English Association already knows; and will therefore best know how to extend its operations over the whole English territory. All that I can do now is to remind you urgently of the need, which is pressing, and the power, of which you must already be conscious. I ask you for help to devise and put in operation a scheme under which your Association would ally itself with all those men and women in every neighbourhood who have grasped the fact of to-day—the salient fact that the present frame of society is wholly inadequate to find place for all who are able to create and worthy to enjoy an unembarrassed sense of national unity.



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